

SPANISH HARLEM ORCHESTRA

Viva La Tradicion

For 50 years, one pianist has been at or near the creative fulcrum of several of the greatest bands in the history of salsa and Latin jazz. No, I am not talking about Eddie Palmieri, “El Maestro,” who has been at the fulcrum of his own bands for *longer* than 50 years. I am referring to Oscar Hernández, the founder, music director and chief arranger of the Spanish Harlem Orchestra.

In the early '70s, a clique of young musicians would gather at the Bronx home of Andy and Jerry Gonzalez, where the brothers had a huge record collection consisting of both classic Afro-Cuban music and free-form jazz. From these basement listening sessions and jams was born Grupo Folklorico y Experimental Nuevayorquino, which recorded two albums in the mid-1970s that redefined the way Cuban and Puerto Rican rhythms and melodies spoke to each other in the roots of New York salsa. Although he says he was still learning how to play the piano and working off natural ability, Hernández held his own in this heavy company.

From Grupo Folklorico came Libre - later known as Conjunto Libre - led by Manny Oquendo, a master percussionist who had played with Eddie Palmieri in the 1960s. Along with another veteran of Palmieri's La Perfecta band, trombonist Barry Rogers, the original Libre featured Andy and Jerry Gonzalez on bass and congas, respectively, and 21-year old Oscar Hernández on piano. Hernández next went with Ray Barretto, with whom he recorded the classic *Rican/Struction* album in 1979. A veteran of dozens of classic Blue Note jazz sessions in the 1950s and '60s as well as a long-time member of the Fania All-Stars salsa band, Barretto gave Hernández his first opportunity as an arranger over the course of five albums. He says his work with Barretto laid the foundation for the sound of the Spanish Harlem Orchestra.

In 1983, Hernández got a call from vocalist/songwriter Ruben Blades, whose partnership with Willie Colon had elevated the popularity of New York salsa to new heights in the 1970s. Blades was looking to form a new band with a new sound, and he wanted Hernández to help him. The band, Seis del Solar, was signed to Elektra Records, which beginning with its first album for the label, *Buscando America*, gave Blades a platform to introduce Afro-Latin rhythms and topical Spanish lyrics to a pop-crossover audience. The group's sound incorporated electric keyboards and guitars into what could be considered a Latin adaptation of jazz fusion, though Hernández himself mostly stuck to the acoustic piano.

In the '90s, Hernández served as the music director for Paul

Simon's Broadway musical, *The Capeman*. Despite poor reviews and a relatively brief run, it was nominated for a Tony Award for best original score and Simon released an album of songs from the show co-produced by Hernández. By this time, the once-vibrant salsa club scene had declined, and the music itself had turned away from *salsa dura* (hard salsa), which features powerful horn sections and intense percussion often culminating in over-the-top rhythmic climaxes, toward sweeter *salsa romantica*, favoring formulaic arrangements with little or no room for instrumental virtuosity or spontaneity and putting the focus primarily on the vocalists, not the bands.

In 2000, Hernández was working as a freelancer when he was approached by a producer named Aaron Levinson about forming a band that could recreate the classic salsa sound, not only that of '70s-era Fania All Stars, Willie Colon and Ruben Blades but going back further to the big bands of Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez. Hernandez and Levinson dubbed the band the Spanish Harlem Orchestra, after the neighborhood on Manhattan's Upper East Side heavily populated by Latinos, particularly Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. They recorded an album, *Un Gran Dia En El Barrio*, that sat in the can for two years before being picked up for release by a different label. The album received a Grammy nomination, and the band's next album won the Grammy for best salsa album, the first of three for the band. Twenty-plus years later, SHO is still going strong. In August, the band released its ninth album, *Swing Forever*, which opens with a version of Ray Barretto's *Yo Vine Pa'Echar Candela*, originally recorded in 1975. The band's previous album, *Imágenes Latinas*, takes its title from a song on Libre's 1978 album *Con Salsa...Con Ritmo, Vol. 2: Tiende Calidad*. One of the band's earlier albums is titled *Viva la Tradicion*.

“Those were the days, man. They're not doing it like that anymore,” says Hernández from his home in Los Angeles, where he has lived for close to 20 years, though the rest of the band is based in New York. “I'm blessed to have lived during that era. It's why I am the musician that I am. I'm proud to represent the best of my culture through the music. There are some great musicians in this band. I'm counting on them to keep the flame alive.”

Oscar Hernández, 70, grew up in the South Bronx, the youngest of 11 children born to Puerto Rican immigrants. There were no other musicians in his family, but Oscar was exposed to the music of Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez as a child and later snuck into clubs to hear Eddie Palmieri and Ray Barretto. His first instrument was trumpet. When he was 14, his brother brought home a piano that the family put in the basement of apartment building where they lived. Local musicians showed him the rudiments of how to play piano;

the rest was self-taught, though he eventually earned a music degree from City University of New York. Hernández made his recording debut while still in his teens with percussionist/vocalist Joey Pastrana, and then went with Ismael Miranda, who later sang with the Fania All Stars. At one of these gigs, the Gonzalez brothers introduced themselves to Hernández, told him they liked the way he played, and invited him over to the crib.

“We used to stay there listening to music until 4 or 5 in the morning,” Hernández recalls. “Those were really fertile days for learning about this music. They were really concerned about learning the roots of music and maintaining those roots, and how the music evolved and developed to where it was. They also had their ear to the ground when it came to jazz. I was more interested in the older stuff. They introduced me to Bud Powell, James P. Johnson, Tommy Flanagan...”

The jazz education Hernández got from the Gonzalez brothers - who later co-led the Fort Apache Band, a no-compromises, progressive Latin jazz band - has stayed with him. Like Eddie Palmieri, whom Hernández credits as a primary influence, his piano playing combines the percussive rhythmic drive of salsa with the sophisticated harmonies of jazz. “I’m not going to say I’m a good “jazz” player because that’s something different,” he told George Rivera in an interview published at the *jazzconclave.com* website in 2001. “You know it’s like everything else, you have to be doing it all the time. I’m a good Latin player, and a good Latin jazz player. In some respects I feel like, without sounding like I’m on some ego trip, I’m the best at what I do...”

Over the last eight years, Hernández has recorded four albums with his Latin jazz quintet, Alma Libre, mostly featuring his own instrumental compositions. The latest, *No Words Needed*, was released this year on Hernández’s own new Ovation Records, not to be confused with the 1970s country label of the same name. One of the compositions, *Wayne’s Wonder*, is dedicated to the late Wayne Shorter and demonstrates that Hernández is indeed a very good jazz piano player.

But the quintet is essentially a side project. The Spanish Harlem Orchestra is Hernández’s baby. The instrumentation is not a full-sized big band - ten musicians including two trumpets, two trombones, one saxophonist doubling on flute, piano, bass and three percussionists, plus three singers - but it packs a big band punch. The three singers share lead vocals and harmonies, while the horn arrangements feed the rhythmic fire by pitting the brass instruments against each other and the baritone sax in slashing riffs that approach hurricane intensity. And always,

even on the slower numbers, the congas, bongos and timbales stir the polyrhythmic pot around the clave pattern that forms the core of Afro-Cuban music.

From its roots in Afro-Cuban rhumba to the Golden Age of mambo in New York, salsa music was invented for dancing, and the Spanish Harlem Orchestra is arguably the best old-school salsa band still on the road. It is almost impossible *not* to dance to this music. But Hernández says he actually prefers playing sit-down concerts to ballrooms and outdoor festivals.

“We’ve done all the major jazz festivals. We actually have a Latin jazz repertoire that we can do within the salsa concept,” he says. “When we are playing in front of a sit-down audience, if people want to get up and dance, I get it. But I would prefer for them to sit and listen, because of the excellence of the musicianship. It’s swinging, but sophisticated, because of the level of the arrangements.”

Almost all of the musicians in the band have been with SHO for at least 15 years, some longer, and by this time, they are a machine-tooled ensemble full of dynamic soloists. Each of



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the three vocalists brings his own style to the mix, and when they kick into the *coro* - the call-and-response chorus over the *montuno* vamp anchored by the piano that forms the climax of many salsa songs - the voices can take on a culturally transcendent dimension that has been passed forward for generations going back to Africa.

"People had forgotten what this music really sounded like," Hernández told an interviewer from *latinomusiccafe.com* in 2017. "When I listen to all those recordings I did with all those great bands - with Ismael Miranda, with Conjunto Libre, with Ray Barretto, etc., there is a certain thread that connects that salsa music to the music we do today with the Spanish Harlem Orchestra... I can tell you that the Spanish Harlem Orchestra records the old-fashioned way; we record *live*. Not everybody can hear it, but those people who care and become connoisseurs of what the music is, they can tell. And those are the people I'm appealing to."

Viva la Tradicion!

Rick Mitchell



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